Show Boats on America's Inland Streams

By HENRI De QUESTIER

MORE show boats will range the Ohio River and its tributaries this spring and summer than ever before were afloat upon that stream. The majority of this craft will be motion picture theaters.

For today there is no more profitable show route in the United States than the 1,000-mile length of the Ohio River, and the hundreds of miles of navigable waters of the seventy-seven streams that empty into it. Compared with railroad rates that make overland transportation of shows almost an impossibility, the cost of carrying a show from river town to river landing is next to no expense at all.

All these show boats will do a tremendous business. The people who live along their route have plenty of money to spend. But that is only a minor reason for the scramble to get on the waterway this season. The owners of these shows are hoping to build reputations for furnishing good performances that will be assets when the river amusement business reaches the volume that it is expected to attain.

In the future this water show route will be much better than it is today, because of the nearness to completion of the canalization of the Ohio River. About one-half of a series of fifty-three locks and dams are in operation between its source and its mouth. When the remainder of them in course of construction are in operation a nine-foot stage will be maintained in the stream throughout the year.

Heretofore, the Ohio River has been a whimsical steam, afflicted with numerous and wide-apart variations in depth. They not only seriously interfered with navigation, but at times they brought it to a full stop for awhile—the channel could then be forded at a good many places above Cincinnati. Prospects for being on a permanently navigable thoroughfare have stimulated steamboating and business in every city and town along the river, and even at little landings, where there is nothing but a general store in the center of a group of three or four houses on the shore. And this stimulation has reached well up to the head of navigation on the tributaries.

As an illustration of the liveliness that is reflected in the number of show boats on the Ohio River this year, from one landing that is a smooth, unbroken stretch of sand with nothing upon it, 50,000 barrels of apples were shipped by steamboat to Cincinnati last fall. There will be more of them shipped from this landing in 1921. The average price received by the shippers for the apples was $7 a barrel, laid down on the sand where the steamboat could pick them up. The total production was grown on an area that took in not more than ten miles of the country back from the landing. Between seasons, when the orchards do not demand attention, timber is cut in the vicinity, and worked into the cooperage used in shipping the crops.

In former years, none of this work was done. The orchards were neglected. Comparatively few apples were shipped from this landing, because there was no dependable way to get the crop to market, except by wagons to the railroad a long distance away. When canalization was assured, however, the orchards were gone over, and their production is increasing. There is now a convenient and cheap way to market the crops by river when the demand for apples is heavy. And this seven times fifty thousand is the total number of new dollars that the people in this region have to spend that did not come to them before. They are inveterate show boat patrons—all of them, even to the far limits of this ten-mile area, and beyond it. Multiply this liveliness by a similar stir in all sorts of industries along the full length of the Ohio River and you have the dollars and cents reason for the influx of show boats on its surface.

In the water-soaked country of Louisiana, show boats return handsome profits. The craft range the country during fall and winter.

However, but few people who live away from the Ohio River—and a good many who live in the cities on its banks—are aware of this quickness in the river show business. They never even have heard of a show boat, though the craft have navigated the inland waterways of this country for so many years that no one knows when or how they started to do it. The Ohio River was the first breeder of show boats, and for well more than a quarter of a century they have been one of its important elements of traffic.

Despite these facts, in all that has been said and written about the fluid thoroughfare, you will find practically nothing about show boats. The craft has never been press agented, which is a peculiar statement to make about anything so spectacular as a traveling show. The reason is that show boats seldom stop in the larger cities along their route. People there do not patronize them to the extent that will warrant paying high municipal charges to tie to the water front, and to make parades. There are comparatively few towns on the Ohio River and its tributaries when the count of them is placed beside the number of landings on the stream. But there is a world of villages and clusters of three or four houses with well-settled country back of them on these water routes.

These small places have been intensively developed in the past as good "show towns." There is practically no expense attached to showing at their landings. Year after year, show boats have floated in and out of these more or less remote spots, almost to the exclusion of the larger places. Few disasters have occurred to attract newspaper attention to the craft; and all the other happenings to them take place where news seldom travels fifty miles from where it originates.

Consequently, few inlanders, even if they have heard of show boats, can visualize the craft, beyond the fact that they must be something that floats, and that whatever shape they have, they carry a show from river town to river landing. Well, that is what they do, plus something more. The performances always are held on board. There is no record of a water amusement enterprise that had a successful season where the performances were given in a tent or other structure on the shore. To people who live along these streams there is a glamour about the river, and the things that float upon it, that never is dimmed. Most of their joy in going to see a show is the opportunity to be aboard something that so essentially is a part of the waterway, and they will not patronize land shows to the extent that they will those whose performances are given on the water.

From the standpoint of the show-boat owners this attitude is very satisfactory. When the boats are set for a performance at the beginning of the season there is no need to disturb the arrangements until the close of the season, when the boat is overhauled and repainted for the succeeding season. That eliminates wagons, horses and workingmen who otherwise would be required to haul the tents and paraphernalia on shore; set them up; tear them down, and haul them back at night. There are no workingmen on a river show; only the crew demanded by Federal regulations for the steamboat that pushes it.

About the best idea you can get of a river show boat is to imagine yourself picking up a freak show from a street fair; or lifting your favorite theater or motion picture house, putting it down on the surface of the Ohio River, hitching a steamboat to it, if your choice is a theater—if it is a freak show, letting it drift with the current—and in that fashion float down the waterway, giving performances wherever you can drum up a crowd. The architecture of your craft will be the same, whatever variety of amusement you offer—a light draft barge, covered with a superstructure. Dimensions will vary according to the amount of money you have to spend on your boat.

Drifting with your freak show is emphasized, because show boats have no power of their own. And they belong in one or the other of two very distinct classes, the quacksalvers and the floating theaters. The former are hitched to no motive power. They float downstream, hand-steered by broad boards, nailed to the ends of long poles. Their season begins in the vicinity of headwaters early in the spring, and ends in the neighborhood of Cairo in the late autumn, unless they feel the urge to float down the Mississippi to the fantastic fluid routes through the swamp country of Louisiana. If they do not do this, they are towed to headwaters during the winter with any sort of a fleet going in that direction.

Attractions on the quacksalvers range from preserved whales to collections of gulf and sea fish, and from "Artec mummies"—manufactured from papier-maché in North Cambridge, Massachusetts—to forlorn freaks, exhibited in a "pit," built on the order of a side show at a street fair. The boat is tied to a landing, and remains there as long as stragglers with some curiosity and a dime will wander aboard. There is no advance notice of the coming of the craft; and there is no "ballyhoo" to attract sight-seers.

A lurid banner is stretched across the shore side of the boat. A few small "heralds" announcing what there is to be seen are tacked to trees, and hung in the general store, at the landing. Everybody for miles around, however, soon knows that the quacksalver is at the landing, for nothing moves or stops on the river that isn't observed and talked about. The people who operate these freak shows are queer human documents in the record of inland waterways—mentally, they are as alert as a Coney Island side show spieler; physically, they are as inert as it is possible to be without entirely ceasing to function as a human being. They live in cabins built on the rear of their boats.

Floating theaters, also, are divided into two distinct classes, the theaters and the motion picture shows. The latter seat about two hundred persons and are towed by small gasoline boats. Electricity for the show and for illuminating purposes is generated on the gasoline boat. Their interiors are arranged precisely like those of any land motion picture theater. The living quarters for the owner and the crew and the people required to operate the show are in the rear of the theater. There is a small amount of advance work done by these shows—not many days ahead of the outfit. Then the advertising is confined to a few hand bills distributed at the general store at the landings, because the motion picture craft seek out the smaller places. They show there for one night, and go away with a slight profit. The principal advertising is done by a compressed air calliope when the craft arrives at the landing.

Floating theaters of the first class are towed by a steamboat. Usually it is large enough to quarter the performers and the musicians in about the same style as if they were put up at good hotels. Where the towboat is small, it quarters only the crew, and the performers and musicians live in rooms built on the theater boat.

The superstructure of a floating theater is a two-story affair, painted white and trimmed with aluminum paint to give the appearance of silver mountings. Large windows are left in the sides to provide ventilation. A gangway is built along its sides to give access to the rear when a performance is on, and it is impossible to go through the interior of the structure. The boat is heated by steam in cool weather; cooled by electric fans in hot weather; and it is lighted by electricity generated on the towboat. The outfit is steered from the roof of the theater. Lines are carried across the roof, and across the roof of the steamboat to the rudder. Signals to the engineer are given by whistles, and the lines to the whistles are carried back in the same manner.

At the front and rear ends the lower story is cut away to form a deck. The projecting upper story forms a canopy over these end decks, the forward canopy being a comfortable porch, and the rear canopy inclosing the kitchen and dining room. Behind the forward canopy are two medium-sized rooms on each side of a narrow hallway. They are the apartments of the proprietor or manager, who is a peculiar combination of showman and riverman. Beyond these rooms two or three others are built. They are occupied by performers and the pilot when the towboat is a small craft. Beyond these rooms is the balcony. There is no gallery on a floating theater.

Entrance to the theater is in the center of the front deck. At one side of the door is the ticket office; on the other side is the room of the star of the aggregation. A passageway between the ticket office and the star's room leads to the interior. From the passageway a flight of stairs leads to the balcony.

Except in decorations, there is no difference between the interior of a floating theater and a show house on land. The interior of the former is painted white, and there is no attempt to conceal the iron rods and braces that give stability to the structure. The seats are on an incline, and they begin near the door. The reserved seats occupy about half of the seating space. In the upper stretches of the Ohio, reserved seats pass under that name. Farther downstream there is a belt in which they are known as "set down seats," probably because they are insurance of a comfortable place in which to sit, and an unobstructed view of the show when the crowds overflow the seating capacity—which varies from 700 to 1,200—as is often the case.

The stage occupies the entire width of the theater at the rear end. The scenery is the work of skilled artists, and in variety it meets all of the requirements of any repertoire show, presenting dramas and comedies, or a show with a program made up entirely of